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MILTON AND THE PSALMS

In April, 1648, before he became blind, Milton translated from the original "into meter" nine Psalms (80-88), and in 1653 eight more (1-8) were "done into verse."¹ The earlier attempt was an experiment in accurate translation; the later one, an experiment in versification.² Probably Masson was right in assigning as a motive for the translation of 1648 Milton's desire to improve upon the current versions of the Psalter, and in supposing that this aim determined the form which the experiment took. He used the ordinary service meter of eights and sixes, but rimed the first and third lines instead of merely the second and fourth, as was generally done. He translated directly from the Hebrew, italicizing words in the translation for which there was no Hebrew equivalent. The title reads, "Nine of the Psalms done into meter; wherein all, but what is in a different character, are the very words of the Text, translated from the original." The subordinate clause is rather misleading, for it implies a more literal rendering of the Hebrew than Milton attempted, or, at any rate, than he attained.

The most striking quality of the translation is the expansion of the original. Sometimes this is due to the free use of synonyms, as when Milton employs (in Psalm 82) four different words to render various forms of the Hebrew word שֹׁפֵט, meaning "to judge." In

¹ Upon Milton the Psalms seem to have exerted an early and lasting influence. At the age of fifteen, while a student at Cambridge, he translated into verse Psalms 114 and 136. Throughout his poetry are scattered allusions sufficient to prove how strong an impression they produced upon him. Cf. *Paradise Lost*, Bk. VII, 205-9 and 565-69, with Ps. 24:7-10; Bk. VII, 370-74, with Ps. 19:5; Bk. XII, 561-66, with Ps. 145; and *Samson Agonistes*, 932-37, with Ps. 58:4. In *Paradise Regained*, Bk. IV, 334-49, he gives his opinion of Sion's songs "to all true tastes excelleng."

² Each is an experiment in a special meter. Ps. 1 is in heroic couplets; Ps. 2 is in "terzetti" or Italian tercets; 3 is in a peculiar six-line stanza of iambic quatrains and trimeters; 4, a different six-line stanza; 5, a four-line stanza of iambic tetrameter, trimeter, and pentameter; 6, an iambic pentameter quatrain; 7, a six-line stanza of iambic tetrameter riming ababba; 8, an eight-line stanza riming ababcd.

80:6 he uses two words and a phrase to translate a single Hebrew word יִלְעָנֵנִי. Similarly Milton's

. . . . I have trod
Thy ways, and love the just:

are two words in the Hebrew, הָסִיר אָנִי (86:2). Again Milton's "Whom thou dost hide and keep" renders the one Hebrew word צִפִּינִיךָ (thy hidden), 83:3. In 83:5 Milton's

For they consult with all their might,
And all as one in mind
Themselves against thee they unite,
And in firm union bind.

translates only seven words in the Hebrew.

Milton's translation is not only more expanded, but weaker in diction, being considerably less concrete, more like eighteenth-century diction, than the original.¹ "Cedars tall" take the place of "cedars of God" (אַרְזֵי-אֵל) in 80:10; and "stately palaces," of "dwellings of God" (נְאוֹת אֱלֹהִים) in 83:12. The naïvely simple "Open thy mouth wide (רָחֵב-פִּיךָ) and I will fill it" in 81:10 becomes

Ask large enough, and I, *besought*,
Will grant thy full demand.

Many of the words Milton italicizes as having no equivalent in the Hebrew² are purely conventional and serve only to weaken the effect. This is especially true of the adjectives. Cherubs are "bright" (80:1), the nations "proud and haut" (80:8), the boar "tusked" (80:13), the vine "lovely" (80:8), the psaltery "cheerful" (81:2), the wood "aged" (83:14), the flame "greedy" (83:14), captivity "hard" (85:1), and peace "sweet" (85:10).

¹ This tendency to substitute the vaguely generic for the concrete is evident in all Milton's translation of the Psalms. "Flocks and herds" take the place of "sheep and oxen" in 8:7; and "On God is cast my defence," of "On God is my shield" (מִגְנִי) in 7:10.

² Milton did not follow very closely his plan of indicating all the words not found in the original. In 87:6, for example, though nine words in the translation have no equivalent in the Hebrew, the fact is not shown by the printing. The same is true in 85:11, where the words "and us restore" are not in the original.

Sometimes the interpolated words result in a gain in clearness. Thus the explanatory clause "like to a flower" in the rendering of 85:11 is justified by the light it throws on the meaning of *הַצִּמְחָה*, which does signify "to sprout, as a plant." In at least one instance, however, such a gain was purchased at the cost of turning the poetry into prose. This is in the rendering of 84:3, where, through the introduction of "by," Milton destroyed the apposition of *מִזְבְּחֵי־יְהוָה* (altars) with *קֶן* (nest).¹

More often the interpolated qualifying words and phrases are chosen for their allusiveness. Thus in 80:1, where the Hebrew has merely *יָשָׁב הַכְּרֻבִּים* (dwelling in the cherubim), Milton adds "Beneath their wings outspread," alluding to the lid of the ark of the covenant, upon which knelt two golden cherubs, their wings meeting above. In 83:6 Ishmael is called "scornful Ishmael" in allusion to the story in Genesis (21:9) of Ishmael's mocking laughter. The same chapter of Genesis (vs. 20) supplied the suggestion for Milton's insertion in 83:7 with reference to the Hagarenes, "That in the desert dwell." "Hateful Amalek" (vs. 7) alludes to Deut. 25:17-19; and "Tyre, whose bounds the sea doth check," is an echo of Ezek. 27:4. "Kishon old" is "that ancient river, the river Kishon" of Judges 5:21. The words Milton supplies in 88:5-6 appear to have been suggested by Ezekiel's taunting elegy (chap. 32) over Egypt's overthrow, where those "slain in bloody fight" are described as cast down "unto the nether parts of the earth, with them that go down to the pit."²

There seems to be no question that the Vulgate influenced Milton's translation considerably, and that some of his errors are due to its influence. To this may most reasonably be attributed the grammatical error in the rendering of 80:9:

Thou didst prepare for it a place,
And root it deep and fast.

¹ A quaintly grotesque effect is produced by the inserted line in 80:5:

And mak'st them largely drink the tears
Wherewith their cheeks are wet.

This suggests Milton's early fondness for conceits and recalls the "well instructed" tears of the lines of *The Passion* (48-49):

For sure so well instructed are my tears
That they would fitly fall in ordered characters.

² Invariably Milton translates *רָהַב* as "Egypt." In so doing he may have been influenced by Isaiah, for Rahab (pride) is the latter's favorite name for Egypt.

Here Milton followed the Vulgate, which gives *plantasti radices eius*, whereas the form *תַּשְׁרִישׁ* is really feminine, and the sentence unquestionably reads "It took deep root." The influence of the Vulgate is also apparent in the translation of *גִּלְגָּל* as "wheel" in 83:13 (Latin *rotam*). Though the word, which is derived from *גָּלַל*, meaning "to roll," does sometimes mean "wheel," as in Isa. 28:28, where it is applied to the wheel of a threshing wain, it more usually denotes "that which is blown along by the wind," as dust or chaff or thistledown. The modern Jewish translation and the English revision both translate correctly as "whirling dust." Again Milton follows the Vulgate in a mistranslation of 86:13, where he renders *בְּשֵׂאוֹל* (from the grave of the lower world) as "lowest hell" (Vulgate, *inferno inferiori*). That this error is attributable to Latin influence appears the more probable from the fact that Milton elsewhere thrice translates Sheol more accurately—as "grave" in 88:3, as "pit" in 88:4, and again as "grave" in 6:5. Yet in 88:11 Milton renders *בְּאֵי־בֵרוֹן* (in the abyss) as "perdition," again following the Vulgate, which translates *perditione*. Even where there is no inaccuracy, the Vulgate seems to have influenced the diction, as in the case of the Miltonic compound "Egypt-land," occurring twice in Milton's translation of Ps. 81, which sounds like the Latin *Terra Ægypti*. In 85:6, again, Milton's

Wilt thou not turn and hear our voice,
And us again revive?

sounds like an echo of the Vulgate, *Deus tu conuersus uiuificabis nos*.

Had Milton followed the Latin more closely, he would in some instances have avoided errors. In 85:12, for example, he renders *תַּתֵּן* "shall throw," whereas the Latin *dabit* literally translates it. In 82:1, also, Milton paraphrases

God in the great assembly stands
Of kings and lordly states;
Among the gods on both his hands
He judges and debates.

Here the Latin *Deus stetit in synagoga deorum: in medio autem deos didjudicat* accurately translates the Hebrew.¹ In verse 13 of Psalm 85 Milton translates

Then will he come, and not be slow;
His footsteps cannot err.

Apparently conscious that this did not express accurately the meaning of the original, he added a note purporting to give the literal meaning as "He will set his steps to the way." The form of the verb *יָשָׁם* Milton evidently recognized as masculine, but did not recognize that *צֶדֶק* (righteousness) is a masculine noun and that therefore "righteousness" is the subject of the verb in both members of the parallelism.² A different kind of error occurs in Milton's rendering of 82:7:

But ye shall die like men, and fall
As other princes *die*.

This seems to be the result of a misreading of the Hebrew, which gives *אֲנִי כְּאַחֶם תְּמוּתוֹן וְכְאַחֶר הַשָּׁרִים תִּפְּלִי*. Here Milton apparently mistook the word *אֶחָד* (one) for the closely similar *אֲחֵר* (other).

Milton's opinions occasionally influence his interpretation, giving a turn to the thought quite different from that of the original. In 83:18, for example, he translates:

Then shall they know that thou, whose name
Jehovah is, alone
Art the Most High, *and thou the same*
O'er all the earth *art one*.

Here the italicized words, which, as Milton indicates, have no Hebrew equivalent, are suggested by his Arian opinions, and furnish an interpretation more Hebraic than the Hebrew text itself. Similarly the capitalization of the phrase "Son of Man" in 80:17 implies

¹ The Syriac translator renders, "God standeth in the assembly of the angels, and in the midst of the angels will he judge."

² In Ps. 4:2 Milton renders *בְּנֵי-אִישׁ* (sons of men) as "great ones." In 5:9 he awkwardly translates *קִרְבָּם* "their inside." The word means literally bowels or intestines, because the abdomen was thought of as the seat of the emotions, but the Authorized Version's phrase "their inward part" is certainly preferable. It should be borne in mind, of course, that these Psalms are not, however, among those which Milton claimed to be translating accurately.

Milton's belief, based perhaps upon the interpretation of the Targum, that the words were meant as a messianic forecast, whereas the phrase **בְּרֵךְ אֱלֹהִים** (son of man) is here a personification of Israel, the verse being virtually a repetition of the fifteenth verse, but without the latter's symbolism.¹

Of the completeness of Milton's equipment for translating the Psalms we have hitherto had no certain knowledge. We know that as early as 1625 he owned a Hebrew Bible given him by his tutor, Young. His poem *Ad Patrem*, written at Horton, gives his father credit for furnishing an opportunity to become acquainted with Hebrew literature. Such an acquaintance Milton seems to have believed essential to a liberal education. In his tract *Of Education* Milton, outlining a course of study for youth, mentions "the Hebrew tongue . . . that the Scriptures may be now read in their original, whereto it would be no impossibility to add the Chaldee and the Syrian dialect." This rather ambitious program he seems actually to have put in practice, for Edward Phillips says his uncle's pupils studied "Hebrew, Chaldee, and Syriac so far as to go through the Pentateuch . . . in Hebrew, to make a good entrance into the Targum, or Chaldee Paraphrase, and to understand several chapters of Saint Matthew in the Syriac Testament." To the end of his life Milton seems to have retained his interest in Hebrew. Aubrey, in the notes he collected for a life of Milton, tells us that after he became blind he habitually began the day at 4:00 A.M. by rising and listening to a reading of the Hebrew Bible, after which he "contemplated."

Although Milton's acquaintance with the language and its related dialects is unquestionable, there is, nevertheless, nothing in his translation of the Psalms to indicate that his knowledge of Hebrew was at all unusual in that age when Hebrew was considered, with Latin and Greek, a necessary learned language.² He undoubtedly knew more about Hebrew than Pope did about Greek.

¹ A similar mistranslation occurs in 2:2, where Milton translates **מְשִׁיחֵנוּ** (his anointed one, viz., Israel's king) as "his Messiah dear." Milton's well-known preference for extempore prayer, expressed in *Paradise Lost*, Bk. V, 145-49, influenced the rendering of 5:3, where he translates **הִתְעַרְרִי** (prepare) as "rank."

² A knowledge of the three "holy" languages—Latin, Greek, and Hebrew—was deemed an essential part of the education designed to supply antagonists capable of

Yet, from what has already been said, it should be apparent that his knowledge of Hebrew was not inerrant, that he was not independent of the help the Vulgate might furnish, and that he did not recognize the errors into which his dependence occasionally misled him. His acquaintance with Hebrew was a literary rather than a linguistic or scholarly one. It enabled him to appreciate the distinctive beauties of Hebrew poetry, but did not furnish an adequate equipment for the task he set before himself.¹

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meeting Catholic opponents in disputation. In 1644 Parliament provided, "after advice had with the Assembly of Divines," that in the case of candidates for the ministry "trial be made of skill in the Original Tongues by reading the Hebrew and Greek Testaments and rendering some portions of them into Latin."

¹ Perhaps a consciousness of his inadequacy to the task may account for Milton's having given up (assuming that he ever entertained it) his intention of translating the entire Psalter. Yet Milton did not need to feel ashamed of his accomplishment. Landor's witty comment is absurdly unjust when he said "Milton was never so much a regicide as when he lifted up his hand and smote King David." Milton did not murder the Psalms in translating them.